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MISSOULA---

Led by Marsha Hamilton, one of the finest all-around gymnasts in the Northwest, the 1978 University of Montana women's gymnastics team will once again be one of the top teams in the region.

Last year's squad compiled an 8-4 record highlighted by a seventh place finish in the 17-team field at the NCWSA Regional meet in Missoula.

During the past three years of competition under head coach Sharon Dinkel, the team has put together a 29-8-1 record and has been perennial champ of Montana.

In her final year of competition for Montana, Hamilton should make it to the national meet. She was the first alternate for the national meet last season after a strong showing in regionals and "has a good chance to compete for the all-around title this year at Eastern Washington in regionals," according to Dinkel.

"Marsha worked hard this past summer to improve. She worked especially hard on her vaulting," Dinkel said. "We hope she'll be competing in national competition this year."

In addition to Hamilton, Maureen Wallace and Michelle Wilson return in all-around. Both are strong gymnasts and should score well for Montana.

Other returnees for UM include senior Sandy Sullivan (beam, vault and floor), sophomore Kris Malcolm (beam, vault and bars), Gail Dana (bars) and Jeannine Mehrhoff (beam and floor).

Three new gymnasts should help this year's squad. New athletes include freshman Laura Blake (all-around), senior Georgia Rand (beam, floor and vault), and junior, Judy Carlson (beam and bars).

"Our biggest concern this season is overall team depth," Dinkel said. "There's a considerable drop-off between our fourth and fifth performer in each event. This puts added pressure on our top four to consistently turn in strong performances. Hopefully our younger gymnasts will improve. All they need is experience and I think they will develop."

The Grizzlies have a tough schedule this season, competing against the best teams in the region. "It's the toughest ever," Dinkel said.

The goal this year is to improve on last season's seventh place finish in regionals and be competitive in every meet. With a strong nucleus and promising newcomers, the UM team is on the right track towards achieving this goal.

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